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MANEUVER WARFARE AND GENERAL W. T. SHERMAN'S ATLANTA CAMPAIGN

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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The paper includes the strategic environment in which Sherman conducted his march from Chattanooga to Atlanta. It then provides a basic description of theoretical maneuver warfare to demonstrate the requirements and list some of the restrictions. The paper concludes with how General Sherman, enroute to Atlanta, incorporated maneuver doctrine into his operational successes long before the theory was put to paper.

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Abstract of

Maneuver Warfare and General W. T. Sherman's
Atlanta Campaign

The Atlanta campaign, conducted between May and September 1864 under the guidance of Major General Sherman, proved to be a pivotal military accomplishment. Masterful uses of many aspects of the operational art were demonstrated by General Sherman during this four month period but his repetitive use of maneuver is the most impressive. Sherman's use of innovative concepts in maneuver warfare created a highly mobile fighting force repeatedly able to gain the strategic advantage against a well-entrenched adversary. Though modern operational maneuver is conducted at a speed several factors greater than Union troops were able to move, this research paper demonstrates how Sherman's successful Atlanta Campaign fully supports today's current maneuver warfare doctrine.

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STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

By May 1864, the United States had been involved in a bloody civil war for nearly three years. Both antagonists were exhausted and manpower levels were becoming critical. The Union forces had successfully and aggressively whittled away at the physical holdings and limited manpower of the South. The Union was desperately seeking a decisive victory to demonstrate to the Confederacy that further struggle would be futile. The Southern forces, also seeking that one glorious engagement to rally their troops and revive civilian support, continued to fight valiantly against ever increasing odds.

In the North, the citizenry had lost their enchantment with the war. Losses seemed disproportionate to the gains. The goal of reunification appeared no closer now than at the war's beginning. The Democrats, sensing this discontent, made the war a major political issue in the Presidential campaign. George McClellan, the Democratic nominee, advocating a peace initiative, called the war a failure with no hope of success.[1] Both major political parties were proposing a negotiated peace but President Abraham Lincoln remained resolute in his belief that victory was near. He realized the key to his re-election was in the hands of the military. As had been demonstrated in both the 1862 and 1863 elections, the course of the war would most certainly influence the course of politics.[2] If the President were to be re-elected,

he needed a decisive victory to demonstrate to the country both his sound leadership and that the end of the war would come soon.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis, encouraged by news coming from the North of the waning popular support of the war, saw the weakening will of the Northern populace as a vulnerability to be exploited.[3] Knowing the terrible odds against his Southern forces, Jefferson Davis was looking in every arena for a way to give his constituents hope. If the Confederates could win a few more battles, he felt sure the North would abandon their President and end the war.[4]

President Lincoln selected Ulysses S. Grant to orchestrate and lead the Union forces. Throughout the war General Grant had distinguished himself as a superb strategist and motivational leader. His plan to end the war required the continuous and simultaneous engagement of the two major armies of the Confederacy. By occupying both the major Confederate armies concurrently in a battle of attrition, the North planned to prevent the Confederate forces from reinforcing each other along their interior lines.[5] The plan would also deplete the South's limited resources at a greater rate than could be resupplied from their stockpiles.

Major General George Meade was in charge of the Army of the Potomac. His forces would engage and fix General Robert E. Lee's Army of Virginia, in the East. General Grant and his staff operated with the Army of the Potomac. In the West, it was the

task of General William T. Sherman and the Union armies of the West to occupy the Army of Tennessee led by General Joseph E. Johnston.

THESIS

The Atlanta campaign, conducted between May and September 1864 under the guidance of Major General Sherman, proved to be a pivotal military accomplishment. It set the stage for President Lincoln's re-election and the eventual Union victory. General Sherman demonstrated the masterful use of many aspects of the operational art during this four month period but his repetitive use of maneuver was the most impressive. Sherman's use of innovative concepts in maneuver warfare created a highly mobile fighting force repeatedly able to gain the strategic advantage against a well-entrenched adversary. Though modern operational maneuver is conducted at a speed several factors greater than Union troops were able to move, Sherman's successful Atlanta campaign fully supports today's current maneuver warfare doctrine. An analysis of this "March to Atlanta" compared to modern maneuver doctrine will reinforce the theoretical understanding of maneuver warfare.

THEORY OF MANEUVER WARFARE

Army publication FM 100-5 identifies five different forms of maneuver including envelopment, infiltration, penetration,

frontal attack, and turning movement. Like General Sherman, the wise operational artist will note that all the forms are designed to accomplish the same goal of *"Placing the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power."*[6] A basic understanding of maneuver theory will help clarify the brilliance of General Sherman's outstanding utilization of this principle of war given the environment in which he was operating.

The adherent to attrition warfare seeks to gain the advantage in combat by imposing a higher casualty rate on his adversary, while preserving his own strength. The strategy of attrition is physically concerned with the operational factors of mass and time.[7] It is, therefore, a static two-dimensional form of combat often lacking in creativity or production. The primary goal is to change the relative strengths of the combatants by maximizing the rate of reduction of the enemy's mass, forces, and material while minimizing one's own losses over a given period of time. This slow methodical warfare continues until one side has either gained overwhelming superiority or can fight no more. In attrition theory, the movement of troops is only required to change a position in time and space from which to continue the battle.[8] This limitation in failing to consider the impact of combat momentum is attrition warfare's major weakness.

Maneuver theory is derived from attrition theory. It differs from attrition theory in that it incorporates a third dimension and operational factor, distance, to the factors mass

and time. The interplay of distance with mass and time creates a fourth factor -- operational momentum. Combat power can now be developed from strength of mass, and also from mass with velocity, or momentum.[9]

Maneuver theory is designed to produce a more economical outcome than provided by attrition warfare. Its primary purpose is to force the enemy out of a set position and create the chance to attack him while in a state of unprepared retreat. Troops attempting to retire undergo a period of extreme hazard of attack as they leave their prepared defenses and fall back to the rear. Leverage is necessary to efficiently generate the force necessary to uproot a well-entrenched foe without having an overwhelming numerical superiority which the commander is willing to sacrifice in a direct attack.[10]

Leverage, in general physical terms, is the force produced when a rigid length is fixed at one end to a hinged point and a mass or pressure is applied, or could be applied, on the other end of the length. The leverage force is computed as mass multiplied by the length of the rigid arm.[11]

In a military context, leverage could be thought of as a turning movement. A holding force and a mobile force would be required on the side seeking to exert the leverage and an enemy mass would be the target of the desired leverage force. The holding force would provide the fulcrum from which to base the lever arm. The mobile force would provide the rigid length and

the mass, or pressure, that will or could be applied to the other end of the length, to produce the leverage. The length of the lever arm or, more accurately, the depth of the mobile force, would determine the force produced.[12] The desired products of this turning movement are the dislocation or possible destruction of the enemy mass. The benefit of a leverage maneuver is the movement of enemy forces, gained at a much lower cost than expected from a direct attack.

Basic Maneuver Theory Model

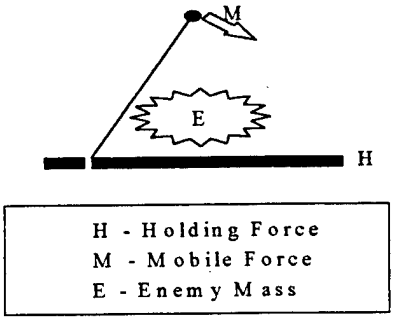


Fig. 1 [13]

As shown in figure 1 above, maneuver theory appears relatively basic, the requirements and limitations on the three differing masses truly make the successful execution of maneuver warfare an operational art. The enemy mass must not be allowed freedom of action. It must be contained in the triangle formed by the location of the mobile mass, the fulcrum between the mobile mass and the holding mass, and the opposite end of the holding mass. If this is not the case, then the enemy forces

will have an option of movement which could counter the turning movement.[14]

The holding force is the key to the success of the functioning of operational maneuver. It must create an opportunity for the mobile forces to gain their strategic position in the enemy's rear. It must remain strong enough to anchor the fulcrum point of the mobile force's lever arm. This vulnerable point must be kept strong. Once the mobile forces are enroute, the holding force must maintain the complete focus of the enemy troops and, if possible, even draw him forward.[15] To maximize the leverage, the holding force must fix the enemy for reasons listed in the previous paragraph.

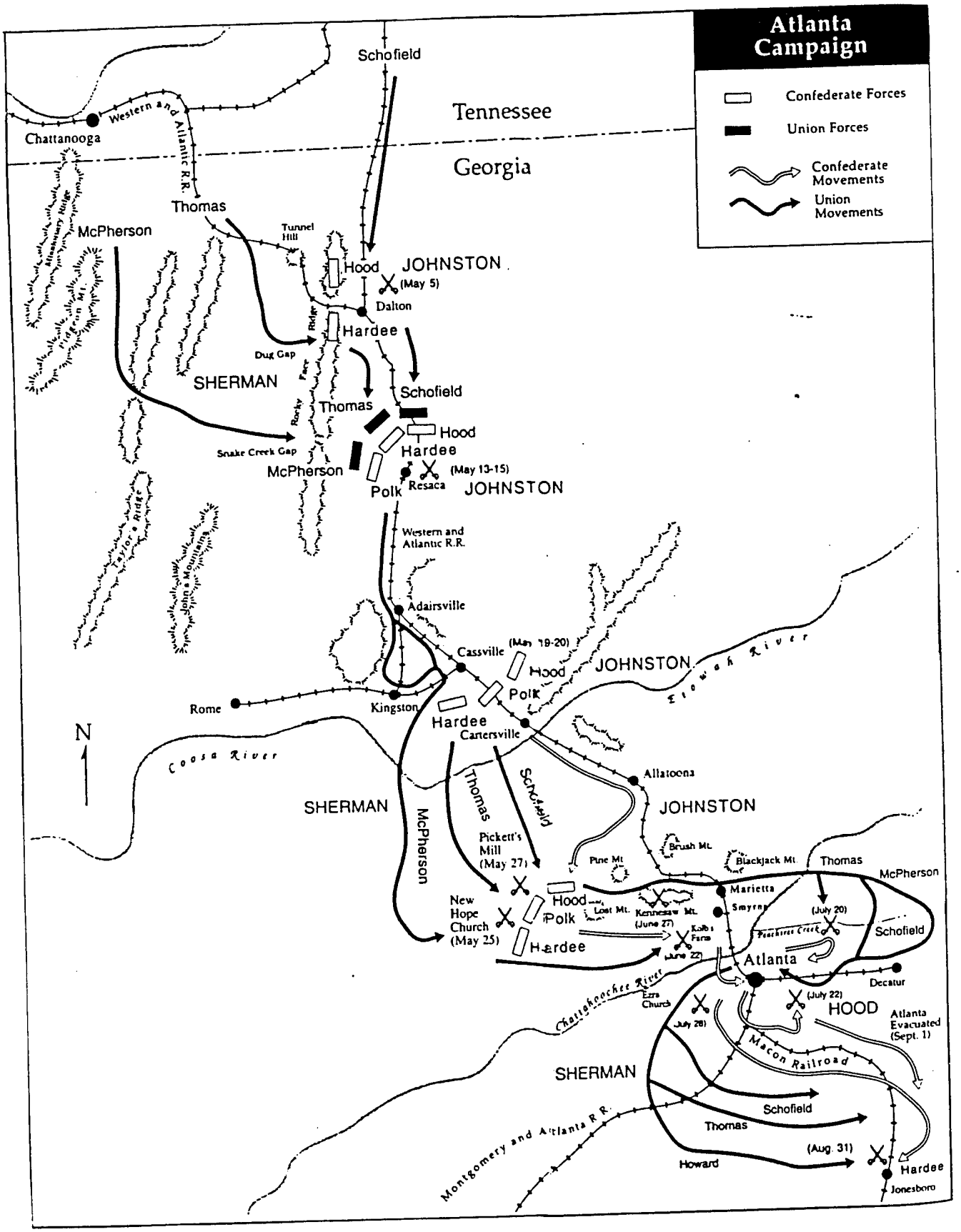
The final mass to consider is the mobile mass which has the most requirements and limitations during maneuver planning. The forces in the mobile mass must be a credible fighting force on their own. Too small a force may not be able to generate the combat power necessary to create the leverage desired. Too large a force and the mass might fail to gain the proper position for executing the leverage desired without first alerting the enemy. This consideration is a prime example of economy of force concerns. This leads us into the discussion of speed in the mobile forces.

The speed of the mobile mass or its ability to move along the moment arm, like the mass size, must be accurately judged to attain the desired effects of leverage. A mobile force that

advances too fast may out run its holding force support and weaken the pressure they can exert. If it advances too slowly, enemy forces could be alerted in time to move to the rear escaping the desired turning movement. The relative velocity of the mobile mass should be physically quicker than the enemy, twice as fast is recommended. If that is not possible, a commander who makes his operational decisions more quickly than his opponent can provide his mobile forces with a significant 'head start' diminishing the relative velocity requirement.[16]

A final consideration the operational commander must heed is length of the lever arm. Theoretically, the longer the arm the greater the leverage applied, however there is a point at which the lever becomes too long and breaks. Likewise, if the lever arm is too short, it fails to generate the required leverage to turn the enemy mass. Choosing the correct depth for the mobile force to exert mass thereby creating the leverage to make the enemy react in the anticipated retreat is a true strategic skill.

The leverage gained through maneuvering mobile forces into the enemy's rear area also provides the opportunity to disrupt critical lines of communication. This potential loss of control of command and control as well as critical supply lines can further leverage the enemy to dislodge and retreat.[17] This disruption of the enemy rear can lead to paralysis and indecision in the enemy command structure. The enemy mass then becomes very


Atlanta Campaign
Confederate Forces
Union Forces
Confederate Movements
Union Movements
Schofield
Tennessee
Georgia
Chattanooga
Western and Atlantic R.R.
Thomas
McPherson
Tunnel Hill
Hood
JOHNSTON
(May 5)
Dalton
Hardee
Dug Gap
SHERMAN
Schofield
Thomas
Hood
Hardee
Snake Creek Gap
McPherson
Polk
Resaca
(May 13-15)
JOHNSTON
Western and Atlantic R.R.
Adairsville
Cassville
(May 18-20)
Hood
JOHNSTON
Polk
Rome
Kingston
Hardee
Cartersville
Etowah River
N
Coosa River
Allatoona
SHERMAN
Thomas
Schofield
McPherson
JOHNSTON
Pickett's Mill (May 27)
Brush Mt.
Pine Mt.
Blackjack Mt.
Thomas
McPherson
Marietta
Hood
New Hope Church (May 25)
Polk
Lost Mt.
Kennesaw Mt. (June 27)
Smyrna
(July 20)
Schofield
Kolb's Farm
Hardee
(June 22)
Atlanta
Chattahoochee River
Ezra Church
Decatur
(July 22)
HOOD
(July 28)
Atlanta Evacuated (Sept. 1)
Macon Railroad
SHERMAN
Schofield
Thomas
Howard
(Aug. 31)
Hardee
Jonesboro
Montgomery and Atlanta R.R.

vulnerable to both the mobile mass and the holding mass while simultaneously reducing the risk to those forces.

In the Atlanta campaign, General Sherman masterfully utilized the rugged terrain which lent itself to formidable defensive posturing to conceal his troop movements as they positioned themselves to turn the enemy out of their defensive bulwarks. The 'stealth' provided by the terrain added to the leverage his mobile forces were able to exert on the enemy. The Confederates, often unsure of the strength of the opposition, could not risk being overrun or isolated from their supply line, the railroad. Instead they opted to fall back to other defensible positions to prepare for battle as the Union soldiers advanced deeper into the heart of Dixie.

THE MARCH TO ATLANTA

On May 6, 1864, in concert with the Army of the Potomac's attack on General Lee's forces, Major General Sherman and his three Union armies of the West began their march south to defeat the Army of Tennessee and occupy Atlanta. Sherman commanded forces totaling 98,797. His three army commanders were General George Thomas, commanding the Army of the Cumberland; General John Schofield, commanding the Army of the Ohio; and General James McPherson commanding the Army of the Tennessee. Given the task of driving these Union forces from the South was General Joseph E. Johnston with the Army of Tennessee numbering initially

Sherman next considered the proposal of General Thomas for McPherson's and Schofield's troops to demonstrate on Dalton while Thomas marched his troops south to Snake Creek Gap, thirteen miles south of Dalton, to force Johnston to react.

Initially Sherman rejected this plan but, with the May 6 strategic commencement date fast approaching, he decided to employ this strategy with a few modifications. McPherson's army was to be the mobile force to go to Snake Creek Gap. Sherman wanted Thomas' forces to be his reserve and rallying point thereby keeping three-fourths of his army to press the Dalton forward defenses. He also modified the original plan by telling McPherson to just destroy the railroad and perform the maximum havoc possible before quickly returning to the defensible position in the gap vice continuing south to Resaca as was in the original proposal by Thomas.[19]

In Sherman's own words, *"Therefore I had no intention to attack the position seriously in front, but depended on McPherson to capture and hold the railroad to its rear, which would force Johnston to detach largely against him, or rather, as I expected, to evacuate his position at Dalton altogether. My orders to Generals Thomas and Schofield were merely to press strongly at all points in front, ready to rush in on the first appearance of 'let go,' and if possible, to catch our enemy in the confusion of retreat."*[20]

Even the best laid plans, if not executed with bravado and wisdom, can fail to produce the expected outcome. The Confederate cavalry did detect portions of McPherson's army moving south but failed to keep contact with them. All General

Johnston knew for sure was that a strong Union force was well behind his left flank. When McPherson's troops finally did appear through Snake Creek Gap, his position looked tenuous. The leverage applied by McPherson's forces caused General Johnston's army to turn and retreat to the south. As General McPherson perceived his position as being met with significant resistance, he chose the defensive option which allowed the Confederate troops to move into Resaca with minimum attrition.

Now nine days into the campaign, the Union armies had pursued the Confederates south positioning themselves to the north and west of Resaca. There were continuous skirmishes with Thomas on the left, McPherson on the right and Schofield holding the middle, keeping the Confederate front line focused. As soon as Sherman determined the Confederates were going to hold up in the forts at Resaca, he sent cavalry south to reconnoiter the Oostanaula river for a position to cross and threaten Johnston's forces from the rear.[21] A suitable location was found about six miles southwest of Resaca and two pontoon bridges were built to span the river. Soon a cavalry unit crossed the river and was operating in General Johnston's rear area with a division of McPherson's troops enroute to cross as well.

The Confederates were fighting valiantly to hold this defensive strong point until General Johnston heard that a division of Union troops had crossed the Oostanaula well to his rear. He modified his offensive plan for the day and ordered

that a pontoon bridge of his own be built near the existing rail and foot bridge. The next day, 15 May, receiving conflicting information about the Union forces in his rear, General Johnston ordered a retreat under the cover of darkness, destroying the bridges across the river as he left.[22] Confederate forces were again turned out of a excellent defensive position by a decisive operational leader and the mobile troops he commanded.

In the maneuvers against both Dalton and Resaca, the skill of the two major commanders was clearly evident. General Sherman showed his superior skill and speed in planning the operations, maneuvering a master of fighting on the defensive out of two formidable positions. In both cases it was the hesitancy of McPherson and his forces to position themselves so as to capitalize on the unprotected retreat of the enemy that may have cost the Union an early victory. In General Johnston's defense, he did a superb job of preventing the Union traps from being fully effective and conducting two orderly retreats which minimized his casualties.

The campaign continued south with the Union forces spread out in a wide 14 mile front, Schofield was to the east, Thomas coming down the rail line and McPherson on the right to the west. In the vicinity of Cassville, the Confederates had set a trap expecting the Union forces to be split, making use of the two main roads to advance their forces. Because the Union forces were widely dispersed the trap was ineffective and Johnston

continued his retreat. The southern troops crossed the Etowah, awaiting the arrival of Union forces in Altoona.

Sherman had traveled this route as a young officer and remembered the rough terrain. In Sherman's words, "*I therefore knew that the Altoona Pass was very strong, would be hard to force, and resolved not even to attempt it, but to turn the position, by moving from Kingston to Marietta via Dallas...*".[23] His plan was to rest for three days, repair the rail line and stock up on supplies to detach and move his whole army to threaten the Confederate rear and their precious rail connection to Atlanta. The plan worked as predicted with Johnston detecting the maneuver from his lofty perch, quickly realizing his adversary's intention and moving south himself to prevent being cutoff from, or allowing easy access to, Atlanta.

The two major armies fought continuous skirmishes for several days in early June with neither gaining an advantage. Sherman moved McPherson's army from the Union right all the way round to the left to secure the railroad just south of Altoona. General Johnston chose to fall back and build his defense where the railroad curved around Kenesaw mountain.

The battle in the Kenesaw area was some of the bloodiest fighting of the campaign for Atlanta. It rained incessantly for nearly two weeks making the low ground a quagmire and preventing the Union forces from using any form of maneuver to their advantage. When the rain did stop, the troops on both sides were

more than ready for some direct action. The Union soldiers were badly repulsed trying to take the high ground and on 1 July Sherman reported to General Halleck, Chief of Staff of the Army, *"..tomorrow night propose to move McPherson from the left to the extreme right, back of General Thomas. This will bring my right within three miles of the Chatahoochee River, and about five miles from the railroad. Johnston may come out of his entrenchments to attack Thomas, which is exactly what I want, for General Thomas is well entrenched on a line parallel with the enemy south of Kenesaw. By this movement I think I can force Johnston to move his whole army down from Kenesaw to defend his railroad..."*[24]

The direct assault had proved too costly to Sherman who was slowly losing his manpower advantage. Each mile he moved further south was another mile he had to defend from rebel raids which meant losing firepower on the front line. Again at Kenesaw, Johnston responded as expected. He brought his army out of their fortified position and fell back one last time to the banks of the Chatahoochee river and, ultimately, to the outskirts of Atlanta.

Over the next month there were four more battles in the campaign for Atlanta, around the city proper, each involving the maneuver of Union troops. The outcome in each battle was the same as those previous; the Union troops maneuvered around the rebel troops and forced them to retreat or be enveloped. Atlanta was vacated by the Confederates on the evening of 01 September and occupied by the Union armies on the next day. Although Sherman was not able to defeat the Confederate Army of Tennessee,

he did keep it well occupied and achieved his secondary goal of taking Atlanta.

CONCLUSION

Major General William Sherman's Atlanta campaign exemplified the fact that "*At all levels of war, successful application of maneuver requires agility of thought, plans, operations, and organizations. It requires designating and then shifting points of main effort and the considered application of the principles of mass and economy of force. At the operational level, maneuver is the means by which the commander determines where and when to fight by setting the terms of battle, declining battle, or acting to take advantage of tactical actions. Maneuver is dynamic warfare that rejects predictable patterns of operations.*"[25] These words sound much like Sherman's intentions and action yet this quote is taken from the Army manual FM 100-5. Sherman's creative and responsive use of maneuver warfare was visionary. The fall of Atlanta was a Godsend for the Union and especially Abraham Lincoln. It provided a psychological and physical blow to the south from which they never would recover. Though the astute student of military history could draw several strategic and operational "lessons learned" from an in-depth study of the Atlanta campaign, by far the most important would be the strength and efficiency gained from a well planned and executed maneuver.[26]

NOTES

[1] Castel, Albert, Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 4.

[2] ibid., 6.

[3] ibid., 17.

[4] Woodworth, Steven E., Jefferson Davis and his Generals, The Failure of Confederate Command in the West, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 257.

[5] Williams, T. Harry, Lincoln and His Generals, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), 308.

[6] Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 100-5 Operations (Washington, D.C., 1993), 2-5.

[7] Simpkin, Richard E., Race to the Swift, (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985), 20.

[8] ibid.

[9] ibid., 22.

[10] Liddell-Hart, Basil H., Thoughts on War, (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1944), 278.

[11] Simpkin, 95.

[12] ibid., 96.

[13] ibid.

[14] ibid.

[15] ibid., 97

[16] ibid., 102.

[17] Joint Military Operations Department, 19.

[18] Bowman, S. M. and Irwin, R. B., Sherman and his Campaigns: A Military Biography, (New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1865), 181-182.

[19] Castel, 121-123.

[20] Sherman, William T., Memoirs of General William T. Sherman, (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1984), 496.

[21] Carter, Samuel, The Siege of Atlanta, 1864, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 120.

[22] Liddell-Hart, B. H., Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958), 251.

[23] Sherman, 511.

[24] ibid., 532.

[25] Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2-5.

[26] Some may contend that if General Sherman had been up against a more formidable foe, such as General Robert E. Lee, the outcome of the Atlanta campaign would have been different. I believe that the excellent defensive posture presented by Generals Johnston and Hood was the best hope for the South and anything else would have only expedited the conclusion of the campaign. Sherman's superb utilization of maneuver combined with his superior resources made the Confederate interior lines useless and any hope of victory impractical.

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